

# BATTLING THE BINARY: EMPOWERING GENDER-CREATIVE CHILDREN

## Abstract:

Living in a society that abides by a binary gender system with rigid definitions of what is masculine and feminine creates limitations on individual freedom of expression and gender performance. This can be especially detrimental to young children who do not abide by these strict rules. Little boys who like pink, wearing dresses, or playing with dolls tend to suffer the most at the hands of bullies. Movies, television, and books reflect gender stereotypes, while commercial and educational establishments reinforce them. Through research and the storied experiences of mothers, I explore this controversial topic.



## Introduction:

**Gender-Creative Children:** “Those are the children who find themselves in a developmental position in which the child transcends the culture’s normative definitions of male/female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside (the body, the psyche), nor totally from the outside (the culture, others’ perceptions of the child’s gender), but resides somewhere in between.” - Diane Ehrensaft, PhD (2011)

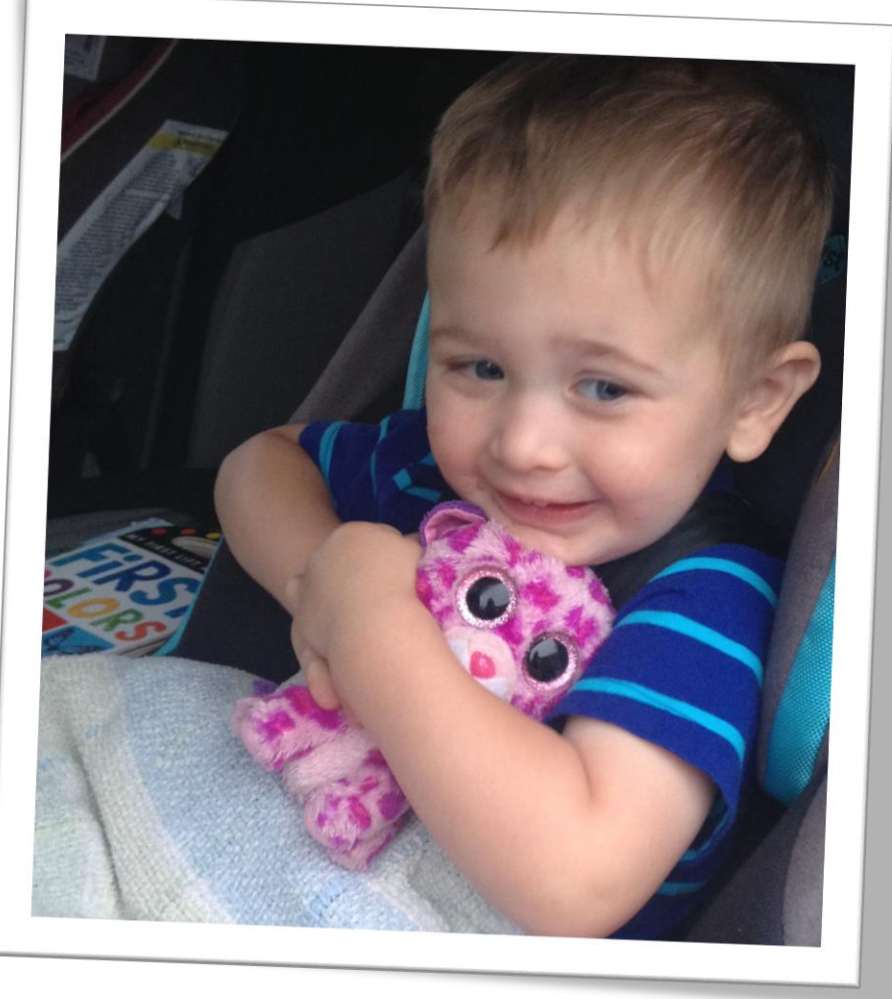
## Heteronormative Conversion:

### Sissy Boy Experiment 1974

Doctoral student George A. Rekers conducts government-funded experiment to break a 5-year-old boy of effeminate behaviors for fear of homosexuality. The child’s family claims the **abusive treatment** led to his eventual **suicide** in adulthood. Rekers claims success. “When we first saw him, the extent of his feminine identification was so profound that it suggested irreversible neurological and biochemical determinants. At the 26-month follow-up he looked and acted like any other boy.”

### Advice from TV Personality Dr. Phil 2002

“Don’t buy him Barbie dolls or girls’ clothes. You don’t want to do things that seem to support the confusion at this stage of the game. Take the girl things away, and buy him boy toys. Most importantly, **support him** in what he’s doing, **but not in the girl things.**”



## Step 1: Gender Binary

Divide populace into two categories: Male and Female. Assign distinguishing characteristics to each gender in order to classify individuals: external genitalia, chromosomes, psyche.

*“Congratulations, (I see the baby has a penis.) It’s a boy!”*

## Step 2: Gender Performance

Socially construct dress and appearance, mannerisms, actions, and activities acceptable for each gender. Men shall act masculine and women shall act feminine.

*“Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails, That’s what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and all things nice, That’s what little girls are made of.”*

## Step 3: Gender Reinforcement

Parents and community members must teach children the binary system and ensure they perform their assigned gender stereotypes based on their genitalia. Violators are subject to ridicule or harsher punishment.

*“Our binary conceptions of gender (male/female, masculine/feminine) are deeply flawed. Rather than all people being easily divided into two groups with contrasting personality and behavioral styles (e.g. feminine females and masculine males), people actually develop complex patterns of traits, behaviors, identities, and sexualities.” - Susan A. Basow (2005)*

## Method:

Through autoethnography, I layer my own experiences of mothering with cultural texts, research, and the voices of other mothers who speak out through social media. By weaving narratives of my experiences as a mother attempting gender-neutral parenting, as well as those of other mothers with current academic discourse on the subject, I engage feminist theories to explore and interrogate the significant impact our gender binary culture has on children – and, in turn, mothers.

## References:

Brown, Christia Spears. *Parenting beyond Pink & Blue: How to Raise Your Kids Free of Gender Stereotypes*. New York: Ten Speed, 2014. Print.

Ehrensaft, Diane. *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-nonconforming Children*. New York: Experiment, 2011. Print.

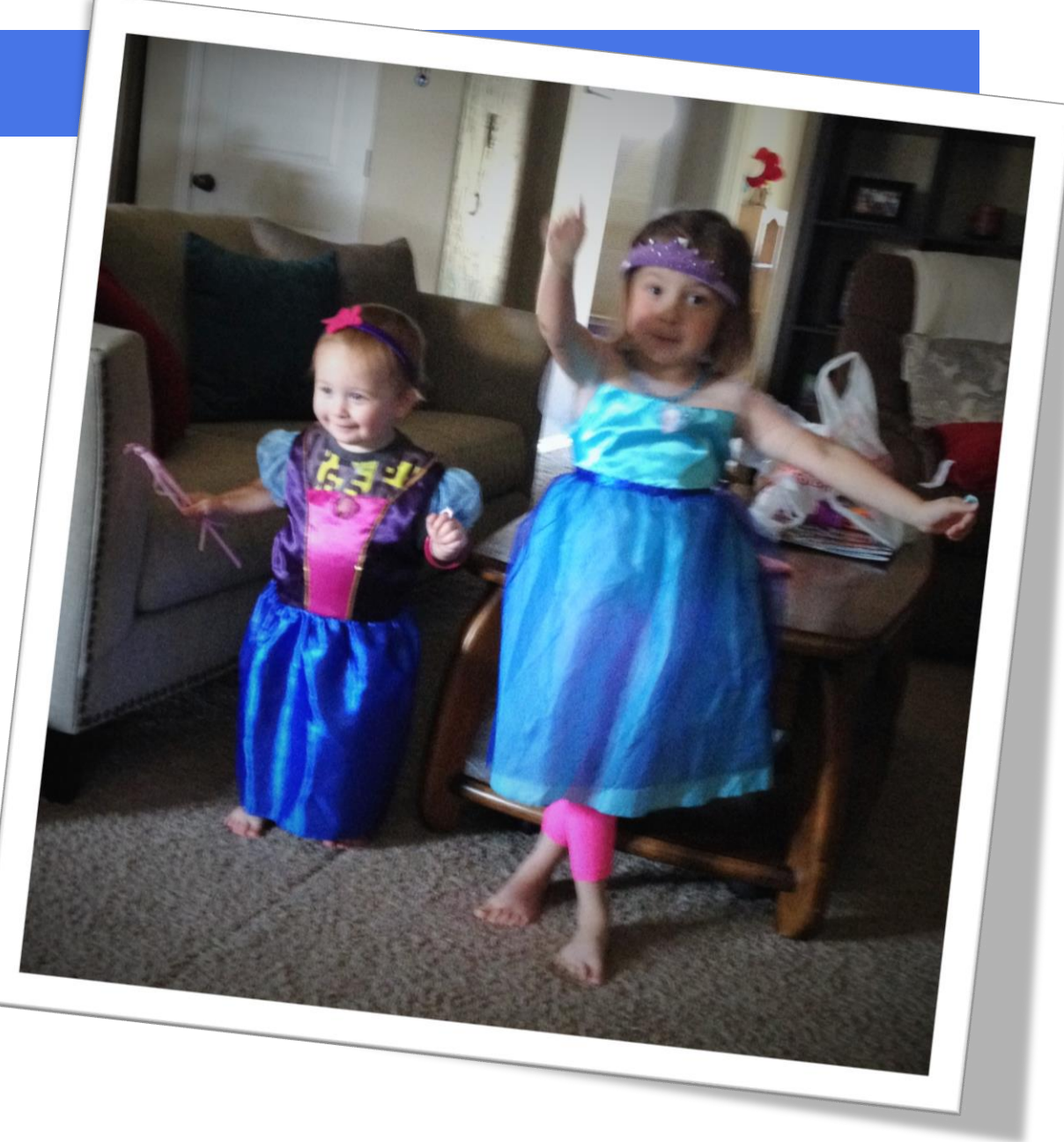
Rekers, George A., and O. Ivar Lovaas. "Behavioral Treatment of Deviant Sex-role Behaviors in a Male Child." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 7.2 (1974): 173-90. Web.

Worell, Judith, and Carol D. Goodheart. *Handbook of Girls' and Women's Psychological Health: Gender and Well-being across the Life Span*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

## Results:

By: Lindsey M. Maurice

Genitalia, chromosomes, and the psyche do not always align. It is up to the individual to determine where they lie on the gender spectrum. If you listen, children will tell you how they identify.



Note: Photos shown are of Lindsey M. Maurice's children.

**Patricia’s 5-year-old gender fluid son:** “From as far back as I can remember, maybe 15-18 months, he enjoyed the best of both worlds. He has been telling me for a few months now that he feels like both. Sometimes he feels like a boy, sometimes he feels like a girl, and sometimes he feels like both together.”

**2) Boys** are not inherently rough, strong, and void of emotion just as girls are not inherently demure, soft-spoken, and outwardly emotional. Our culture raises them to be this way. Many parents do not think to expose their children to toys, activities, and programming geared to the opposite gender.

**Amelia’s 5-year-old son who likes girl things:** “He was 26 months when we traveled to visit my family for my niece’s third birthday. The birthday party was a princess extravaganza and he never looked back. It was as if he was appalled that we had failed to bring these things into his life and he refused to play with anything that wasn’t a ‘girl’ toy from that day forward. I’m sure this is an exaggeration, but that’s how it felt, like a light had been switched on for him.”

**3) Having a preference** for things traditionally reserved for the opposite gender does not determine one’s gender or sexual preference.

**Christia Spears Brown, PhD (2014):** “I believe parents see a boy playing with a doll and think he will be gay, with the flawed conclusion that if he’s stopped from playing with girl toys, he won’t be gay. I hate to break it to you: Playing with dolls doesn’t make a boy gay. And preventing him from playing with dolls doesn’t make straight. . . . Rather, parents who pressure their children into being more stereotypical than they naturally are often end up with children who are depressed and anxious.”

## Discussion:

Medical professionals practicing heteronormative conversion are still very much a reality today and many children suffer at the hands of these individuals. Fortunately, there are an increasing number of developmental and clinical psychologists turning to the approach of unconditional acceptance.

## Mom of 5-year-old gender fluid child:

“Early on we asked a professional the best course of action. He told us what they tell you for any child: follow the child’s lead and support his interests.”

